

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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MUSEUM OF MODERN ART OPENS EXHIBITION OF CALDER MOBILES,
STABLES, CONSTELLATIONS AND JEWELRY

An American sculptor, peculiarly the product of his age and country, will be presented in a full-length retrospective exhibition Wednesday, September 29, when nearly one hundred sculptures, constructions, drawings, and pieces of jewelry by Alexander Calder go on view at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street. The exhibition, directed by James Johnson Sweeney assisted by Margaret Miller of the Museum staff, will be shown in the first floor galleries and sculpture garden of the Museum and will remain on view through Sunday, November 28. The installation has been designed by Herbert Matter, who has also taken many of the photographs for the catalog.

Mr. Sweeney has written the text for the sixty-eight-page catalog illustrated with fifty-eight halftones, which the Museum is publishing in conjunction with the exhibition. In his introduction Mr. Sweeney writes in part as follows:

"Exuberance, buoyancy, vigor are characteristics of a young art. Humor, when it is a vitalizing force not a surface distraction, adds a dimension to dignity. Dignity is the product of an artist's whole-hearted abandon to his work. All these are features of Alexander Calder's work, together with a sensibility to materials that induces new forms and an insatiable interest in fresh patterns of order.

"On the side of tradition, two generations of sculptors--father and grandfather--gave him an intimate familiarity with the grammar and conventions of art. In Paris he came to know the researches of some of the most venturesome contemporary pioneers at a time when he himself was seeking a more radical departure. The result in Calder's mature work is the marriage of an internationally educated sensibility with a native American ingenuity. Through the individuality of his work he has an established place in contemporary art both here and abroad.

"Calder's characteristic material is metal. He has always avoided modeling in favor of direct handling--cutting, shaping with a hammer, or assembling piece by piece. Such an approach has fostered a simplicity of form and clarity of contour in his work. It allies him with Brancusi, Arp, Moore and Giacometti in their repudiation of virtuosity.... At the same time Calder's concern as an artist with mechanical forms and mechanical organizations, and his use of new or unconventional materials link him with the Russian constructivists of twenty-five years ago.

"But Calder's most original contribution is his unique

enlivening of abstract art by humor. Through humor he satisfies the observer's appetite for feeling or emotion without recourse to direct representation.... Through this conscious infusion of a playful element, Calder has maintained an independence of the doctrinaire school of abstract art as well as of orthodox surrealism. At the same time the humor in his work is a protest against false seriousness in art and the self-importance of the advance-guard painter, as well as of the academician.

"Calder is an American. The most conspicuous characteristics of his art are those which have been attributed to America's frontier heritage.... But Calder is a child of his own time. His vernacular is the vernacular of his age in America--an age in which the frontiers of science, engineering and mechanics have dominated the popular imagination in the same way that the national frontier dominated it a century ago."

Calder's art parallels in its movement, variety and unpredictability the course of the artist's life and career. Born near Philadelphia in 1898 of artist parents--his mother a painter, his father A. Stirling Calder a noted sculptor--five widely separated parts of the country successively became his home before he was fifteen: Pennsylvania, Arizona, Southern California, New York State, San Francisco. He graduated from high school in San Francisco, then went to Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, New Jersey, for an engineering course from which he graduated in 1919.

The next four years he spent in a succession of jobs in the East and Middle West: two weeks as an auto-engineer; six months as draughtsman for a light and power company; eight months as engineering-editorial advisor on a lumber trade magazine; a few weeks as efficiency-engineer for a window-sash company and later for a department store; a few days as demonstrator of a motorized garden cultivator; fireman on a ship from New York to San Francisco; six months as timekeeper in a logging camp; and finally back to New York in the Fall of 1923, where he enrolled in the Art Students League.

Calder worked under Sloan, Luks, Robinson and Du Bois during his first year at the League. On the side he tried his hand briefly at designing book jackets, doing magazine illustrations and making theatrical drawings for newspapers, etc. In 1924 he obtained a job on the National Police Gazette doing half-page spreads of sports and amusement sketches. In his capacity as artist on the Gazette he was given a two-week pass to cover the circus in the Spring of 1925. His first visit was enough to fulfill his assignment but he went back every evening for the duration of his pass to sketch the animals in the menagerie tent. Of this experience Mr. Sweeney says, "The first product was a small book Animal Sketching. But this interest in the Circus was to have much more important consequences. Out of it was

to grow his miniature circus which brought him into touch with some of the leaders in Paris at a time when their stimulation was most valuable to him. Still more important, this miniature circus was to serve as a laboratory in which some of the most original features of his later work were to be developed."

In 1926 Calder's oils were first exhibited in The Artists' Gallery in New York. That same year, after three years at the Art Students' League, Calder decided to go to Paris. He worked his way across on a freighter to England where he spent three days in London, and then went to Paris. With the exception of a fellow-student or two from the League, Calder knew no artists abroad. In the Fall he met the English engraver William Stanley Hayter who introduced him to the Spanish sculptor José de Creeft. The following Spring and Summer Calder put together a few ingenious figures and animals of articulated wire, bits of wood, cork, scraps of cloth, which were the beginning of his famous miniature circus. These small animated creatures could perform remarkable feats. Impromptu performances were given in Calder's room, first to friends and, as the fame of the circus spread, to important critics and artists in Paris. At the suggestion of a painter friend that he make an entire figure of wire, Calder produced his first wire sculpture, Josephine Baker.

Calder's first one-man show, principally wire caricatures of many public figures, was held at the Weyhe Gallery in New York in April 1928. A few weeks later, his Romulus and Remus group--a fantastic eleven-foot-long wire she-wolf nursing a pair of wire youngsters from a row of pendent door-stops--caught public attention at the Independents show.

Before going to Paris in 1926 Calder had experimented in wood carving, and from an old fence rail picked up in Connecticut had made his first sculpture in that medium, the Flattest Cat. Upon his return to New York, he began working in wood again. He left a number of wood sculptures behind when he returned to Paris, and in January 1929 had an exhibition of them at Weyhe's.

In the Spring of 1929 he had an exhibition of wood sculpture and wire caricatures in Paris and another in Berlin. At the time of the latter he made his first piece of jewelry, a wire collar with a projecting beam from which a wire fly dangled. The same year he produced a wire goldfish bowl through which wire fish were made to swim back and forth by the turning of a tiny crank.

Upon his return to Paris in 1930 he met many modern artists, among them Miro, Pascin and Léger. That Spring the abstract painter Mondrian was among the artists who visited Calder's circus. Calder paid a return visit to Mondrian's studio, whose white walls were the background in a composition formed by removable rectangles of red, blue and yellow. Calder himself has said that this first view of Mondrian's studio gave him "the necessary shock" which opened the door to his subsequent development. The result became apparent in compositions of abstract shapes of wire, wood, metal and bits of things and the application of color to these tiny spheres and discs to which the abstract artist Arp gave the name of stables. When Calder set similar compositions in motion by ingenious motor-driven or hand-crank mechanisms they were called mobiles. A further--and the latest--development came when he designed mobiles so finely balanced that a puff of air or the slightest touch set them in motion, and free and unpredictable rhythms became possible instead of controlled patterns.

Now, at the age of forty-five, Calder's fame is international. His sculpture is a kaleidoscope of form and color in unpredictable constellations. He combines nature with geometry, constructs balances operated by mechanics or the wind, and cuts fantastic and beautiful shapes out of air.